

# FACT SHEET



**Third Avenue Mercury Site  
Council Bluffs, Iowa**

**December 1998**

## INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Council Bluffs Department of Public Health are responding to a release of mercury, a hazardous substance, which originated in a house west of downtown Council Bluffs, Iowa. The mercury contamination has subsequently been spread to at least one other nearby residence.

## BACKGROUND

The home where the mercury was released is an older home with a furnace system dating from the early 1900s. The furnace used approximately one quart of mercury in its pressure relief system, which was contained in the upstairs bathroom. About a year ago, a plumber disconnected the pressure relief system from the boiler, which is believed to be the source of the release of mercury. Since then, residents of the home noticed mercury in the house and have tried to clean it up as it appeared.

EPA was notified of the mercury contamination by the Iowa Department of Public Health December 10, 1998. EPA found elemental mercury present in the home. In addition, EPA conducted air monitoring of the home and determined that mercury was present at levels that present a threat to human health and the environment. EPA also detected mercury in the air in a nearby home, occupied by relatives of the residents of the home where the spill originally occurred, and a detached garage. It is believed that the mercury was spread to this residence from the home where the spill occurred through transfer of belongings and on clothing.

EPA recommended that the affected residences be evacuated. To date, six people have been evacuated and temporarily relocated. The two occupants of the nearby house may relocate very soon.

## MERCURY HEALTH EFFECTS

Mercury spills present a serious health hazard. Elemental mercury, also known as quicksilver, can slowly vaporize at room temperature and cause mercury poisoning in people who breathe the vapors. Mercury can also enter the body through contact with the skin or ingestion. Mercury poisoning can affect the skin, respiratory system, central nervous system, kidneys and eyes. The form of mercury and the way in which people are exposed determines the severity and kinds of health effects. Mercury can also affect sensitive populations, such as people with asthma and

chronic bronchitis more severely. Developing fetuses and children are the most sensitive to mercury exposure. Mercury can be detected in the body through blood and urine tests.

### **CLEANUP ACTIVITIES**

EPA will begin initial efforts this week to remove visible mercury from the home where the spill occurred. This action is expected to take approximately two weeks. EPA will also begin removing or decontaminating mercury-contaminated material in the home, such as furniture and other porous items. Actions are pending at the nearby home where mercury was also detected.

### **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

The Council Bluffs Department of Public Health is working closely with EPA to address the mercury contamination. If you have questions or would like additional information, please contact:

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